Psychospiritual Conceptualization of Nafs from the Perspectives of Muhammad Iqbal

Fahad Khan*, Asma Nisa†

Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) was an intellectual who aimed to revive the status of the human self within the context of post-enlightenment shifts in society. He posited a model of the human self, known as *Khudi*, which, through continuous efforts and action, has the capacity to obtain the status of divine vicegerency. This process, requiring self-discipline and awareness, focuses on overcoming the demands of the lower self, or the *nafs*. Iqbal presents a conceptualization of the *nafs*, similar to his predecessors in the Islamic tradition, with the goal of taming it, overcoming its natural demands, and perfecting it to serve as a vehicle towards the ultimate goal of divine vicegerency. This paper builds on a previously published paper by Khan and Malik (2021) that presented Iqbal's model of self-development by further expounding on the conceptualization of the *nafs*.

Keywords

Introduction

Contemporary culture is a consequence of intellectual, cultural, and political shifts that have occurred in the last four to five centuries. Enlightenment led to the prioritization of reason and rationality over religious ideals. This was further emphasized by post-modernism that created skepticism towards grand narratives, objective truth, and universal values. The post-truth era, gaining prominence in the 21st century, allows every individual to create their own truths based on their own subjective understanding and experiences. While the majority of reactions to these shifts have been to reject and avoid any conversation, some have recognized them as integral components of natural human intellectual discourse, attempting to reconcile rather than reject. Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), a philosopher, poet, and politician from British India, is considered one of the most influential thinkers in the Islamic world. He engages with post-enlightenment, particularly in terms of grappling with colonialism and modernity.

*Khalil Center, khanfahad@khalilcenter.com
†Khalil Center, asma@khalilcenter.com

Allama Muhammad Iqbal was an eminent thinker, visionary, philosopher, poet, ideological leader, political intellectual, and above all, a great mystic. Some have referred to him as a theosopher, someone who maintained and developed the knowledge of God within their philosophical realms (Khan & Malik, 2021). Dr. Ali Shariati (d. 1977), an Iranian sociologist focused on sociology of religion, described Iqbal as "a man of religion and a man of this world, a man of faith and knowledge, a man of intellect and emotions, a man of philosophy and literature, a man of God and people. A devotee during the night and a lion during the day" (Khan, 2004). Iqbal's message and writings, although with a primary direction, are multiplex with religious, spiritual, literary, educational, political, economic, and social dimensions. He stresses despise of all forms of slavery, including political, economic, social, and, most importantly, intellectual. He firmly believes that once people recognize their *Khudi* (self) and work continuously for its elevation, they can no longer be subjugated to any external or internal forces.

Khudi, a central theme in Iqbal's philosophical thought, can be defined as "a life force, innate within the human existence, striving towards the achievement of its primordial goal of reuniting with its Ultimate Creator, cultivated through self-sufficiency, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, even self-assertion in the cause of truth, justice, duty, and morality" (Khan & Malik, 2021, p.3). Iqbal emphasizes self-affirmation instead of self-negation, contradicting the views of Neo-Hegelians who regarded the sole purpose of human existence as being absorbed or drowned in the universal life or soul (Iqbal, 2010). Rather, he asserts to strengthen the self by recognizing the human potential as the divine representative, thereby integrating the divine attributes into the human personality, and allowing the individual to become more inimitable and unique. Once the person experiences the pleasure of the love of his Creator, he desires to strive towards it forever, and the survival of love depends on the survival of self, whereas the inevitable result of the perishable self is the end of love (Ahmad et al., 1997).

Iqbal is very critical of Western post-Enlightenment thought due to its reductionist approach to the human experience. Iqbal argues for the compatibility of reason and revelation, emphasizing the importance of both understanding the world and human experience. He says in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*:

> The view that ego-activity is a succession of thoughts and ideas, ultimately resolvable to units of sensations, is only another form of atomic materialism which forms the basis of modern science. Such a view could not but raise a strong presumption in favour of a mechanistic interpretation of consciousness. (Iqbal, 2016, p. 96)

Iqbal posits that God commands man to fight the evil thoughts and desires not for the destruction of the ego but rather to foster a deep, inner strength that comes from willful obedience (Dogan, 2014).

In *Asrār-i-Khudī*, translated as *Secrets of the Self*, a collection of his poems in the Persian language, Iqbal elaborates on the concept of *Khudi* and provides a three-stage model of self-development. In this model of self-development, a self can reach its highest position in these three stages: Obedience (*Ita'at*), Self-Control (*Zabt-e-Nafs),* and Divine Vicegerency (*Niyabat-e-Ilahi*). The self that aspires to reach its ultimate goal controls and manages all its desires and inclinations through obedience. However, in this process, the *Khudi* must face one of its most challenging tasks: to overcome its own natural tendencies stemming from the *nafs* (see section below). In the poem from *Secrets of the Self*, Iqbal emphasizes the importance of obligatory acts of worship since these acts of worship prepare the *nafs* to be submissive and overcome its desires. According to Iqbal, reaching the level of becoming God's vicegerent is a noble goal that every human being should strive for. In an earlier publication, Khan and Malik (2021) conceptualized this model quite comprehensively from a psychological lens to make it more applicable, accessible, and comprehensible.

The present paper will expand on one aspect of this model, the idea of *nafs*, as Iqbal presents some key insights on this concept and how one can assert more control over it. Aspects of *nafs*, posited by Iqbal, will be discussed along with their relevance to the current understanding of mental wellness in contemporary literature.

Nafs: Human Behavioral Inclinations

Within the Islamic tradition, significant emphasis has been placed on the *refinement of human* behavior (*tahdhib al-nafs*) and the promotion of virtuous character (*akhlaq*). Islamic scholars have developed numerous guidelines concerning the modification of human behavioral inclinations to foster good character. The concept of *nafs* is not regarded as an inherently malevolent aspect of the human psyche. Human beings, born with the innate disposition of *fitrah*, possess the capacity to recognize and strive towards virtuousness. Nonetheless, the material existence in the temporal world engenders conflicting drives within the nafs that, if left unchecked, could succumb to hedonism and self-destruction, much like the entropic material world.

According to Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), the *nafs* encompasses two primary, innate, and instinctual drives: aggressive or predatory tendencies (*ghadab*) and appetitive or pleasure-seeking inclinations (*shahwah*) (al-Ghazālī, 1990). The objective of behavioral reformation within the Islamic tradition is to cultivate a virtuous character and develop into a morally upright individual. The *nafs* transitions through various states, including the tranquil self (*nafs muṭma'innah*) mentioned in Qur'ānic verses 89:27–28, the reprimanding self (*nafs lawwāmah*) in verse 75:2, and the self that incites evil (*nafs ammārah*) in verse 12:53. Individuals may oscillate among these three states at different moments.

In the *ammārah* state, individuals gravitate towards primitive instincts, compelling them to engage in pleasure-seeking or evil-inciting actions. Here, the *nafs* operates like an animal, luring the individual towards fulfilling hedonistic desires, even those deemed harmful or prohibited. Within the *lawwāmah* state, individuals become conscious of their transgressions and reproach themselves, potentially leading to resistance in the pursuit of forgiveness from God. Ultimately, in the *muṭma'innah* state, individuals attain liberation from the inner conflict between virtuousness and hedonism, training their lower selves to desire acts of faithfulness while abstaining from sinful behaviors. At this point, all actions are directed "towards God" and "with God." Upon reaching this state, an individual may experience inner contentment, peace, and tranquility, detaching from worldly concerns and embracing divine guidance.

Some scholars in the Islamic tradition have referred to struggling against the lower *nafs* as *jihad akbar* or the Greater Struggle, which entails a personal struggle against the *nafs* to overcome carnal desires, temptations, and satanic whispers. Muslim theologians, like Ibn al-Qayyim and Al-Isfahani, categorized struggle with one's *nafs* as one of the three forms of *jihad*, with the other two being struggle against the devil and in the battlefield (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1998).

One tradition holds that Abu Huraira reported, "The Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) said, 'The strong are not those who defeat people. Rather, the strong are those who defeat their ego'" (Al-Bukhāri, 6114).

Mullā 'Alī al- Qārī (d.1014 AH/ 1605 CE), in his *Mirqāt al- Mafātīḥ*, states that the *nafs* is born out of the marriage and association between the metaphysical soul (*rūḥ samāwī*) and the body (*rūḥ ḥayawānī*). As the soul is heavenly directed and the bodily impulses are directed towards darkness and evil, the *nafs* contain both good and evil desires (Ali Al-Qari, 2015, pp. 376–377).

As previously discussed, the *nafs* can develop, foster, and progress through various states (such as *lawwāmah* and *muṭma'innah*) by means of refinement and training, ultimately transcending its base animalistic urges and aligning with the divine directives of the higher self. For example, Taqi Uthmani, a contemporary jurist and spiritual scholar from Pakistan, describes aggressive drives as natural tendencies possessing adaptive qualities for protection (Uthmani, 2001, vol. 3, p. 39). Al-Ghazali argues that the total suppression of this instinct would result in cowardice, which is undesirable (Al-Ghazali, 1990). Instead, transforming these aggressive instincts into adaptive behaviors constitutes a crucial step in the process of reformation (Keshavarzi et. al., 2020). The primary method for achieving this objective involves abstinence or acting against one's lower instincts.

Iqbal's Conception of *Nafs*

Iqbal's idea of development of *khudi* (self-development) differs from other psychological-based models, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in many ways. Most of modern psychology, developed in the post-Enlightenment era, tends to focus on individualism with high emphasis on the self. This produces reductionistic models, often ignoring important aspects like the role of social connection (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Rutledge, 2011) and spirituality, and view human beings as evolving animals (Baqutayan & Saleh, 2012; Ismail, Anwar & Human, 2011). Iqbal, being grounded in the Islamic tradition, focuses on the extraordinary potential of the human being to achieve any desired status (Azmi, 1992), including the highest status achievable as the vicegerent of God. Moreover, Iqbal, and other Muslim philosophers, recognize the existence of primordial as well as postmortem life. What fuels the *khudi* and gives man the strength to remain determined in this journey of perpetual development is the love of Allah, which is primal in nature (Kazmi, 2010).

To initiate the journey towards training the *nafs* and reaching man's highest status, Iqbal asserts that man has to undergo many hardships, with patience and perseverance, along with giving up his bodily desires like hunger, sleep, and lust. This results in increased self-control through managing impulses with exertion and self-discipline (Khan & Malik, 2021). In *The Reconstruction*, Iqbal emphasizes that "perfect submission to discipline is followed by a rational understanding of the discipline," leading to a rational view of the world (Iqbal, 2016, p. 159). This discipline further leads to the acceptance of divine commands and internalization of the divine law (Noor, 2020).

Four Essential Characteristics of *Nafs*

Much like his predecessors, Iqbal compares man's *nafs* to an animal (camel), which is a very keen analogy as the camel does not only possess animalistic traits and desires, but it has many attributes that, when trained and nurtured, makes it superior to many other animals. Hence, it is one of the most valuable animals for desert dwellers. Rumi, Iqbal's spiritual mentor, also uses the allegory of Majnun (a lover often portrayed in Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poetry) struggle with his camel and its portrayal of the struggle of the intellect with *nafs*. Much like Majnun's desire to be with his Layla, an individual's higher intellect desires to unite with the divine. However, the camel (*nafs*) keeps taking him back to his home when the rider is not aware of it (Gholi & Mosaabad, 2014). Iqbal says:

نفس تو مثل شتر خود پرور است

خود پرست و خود سوار و خود سر است

> *"Thy soul acts like the camel: It engages in self-nurturing, self-idolatry, self-governing, and is self-willed"* (Nicholson, 1920, Line 850–851).

According to Iqbal, a *nafs* has four innate qualities:

- Self-nurturing or self-cultivating (*khud parwarast*)
- Self-worshiping or self-idolizing (*khud parast*)
- Self-governing or self-controlled (*khud sawaar*)
- Self-willed, stubborn, or rebellious (*khud sarast*) (Khan & Malik, 2021)

These four innate qualities have implications on the wellness of the individual, as highlighted in contemporary literature.

Self-Nurturing or Self-Cultivating *(khud parwarast)*

While self-care is an important aspect of a healthy individual, egotistical and an excessive focus on self-growth can also negatively impact psychological well-being. An overemphasis on self-growth may lead individuals to neglect important aspects of their lives, such as interpersonal relationships (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006), which can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, excessive self-focus may result in a lack of empathy for others (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009), further exacerbating interpersonal difficulties and increasing the risk of psychological distress. Overall, striking a balance between growth and consideration for others is crucial to maintaining psychological health and avoiding potential problems associated with egotistical traits.

Self-Worshiping or Self-Idolizing *(khud parast)*

Often referred to as narcissism in the contemporary literature, self-worship has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including psychological disorders, psychopathy, interpersonal problems, substance use issues, aggression, impulsivity, and even suicidal behaviors (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). Narcissism may encompass both overt and covert aspects, with individuals displaying a combination of arrogance and feelings of guilt, shame, and inferiority (Martens, 2005). Moreover, the inflated sense of self-importance and lack of empathy in self-conceited individuals can lead to difficulty maintaining meaningful relationships and presence of poor communication skills. They may also display a heightened sense of entitlement, leading to unrealistic expectations of others and a propensity to exploit others for personal gain. This pattern of behavior can result in social isolation, reduced social support, and an increased likelihood of experiencing relational problems, such as romantic relationship dissatisfaction and divorce (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Lavner, Lamkin, & Miller, 2016).

Self-Governing or Self-Controlled *(khud sawaar)*

Excessive self-governance, where individuals feel solely in control and in charge of their whims and desires, can be an unhealthy trait from a psychological perspective, potentially leading to other psychological problems. Research suggests that individuals who exhibit extreme self-reliance and independence may struggle to form and maintain close relationships, leading

to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Zakalik, 2005). Moreover, individuals with a high degree of self-governance may be less likely to seek help when needed, increasing their vulnerability to stress and psychological distress (Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005). Such traits may also contribute to a heightened sense of entitlement and narcissism, further exacerbating interpersonal difficulties and increasing the risk of depression and anxiety (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Thus, an extreme focus on self-governance can negatively impact mental health and social functioning.

Self-Willed, Stubborn, or Rebellious *(khud sarast)*

Stubbornness and rebelliousness, characterized by inflexibility in opinions or beliefs and resistance to authority, respectively, can have negative implications for psychological well-being. Stubborn individuals often struggle with problem-solving and adapting to change, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Yang & Clum, 1994). Similarly, rebellious individuals tend to engage in risky behaviors, such as substance abuse and delinquency, which can result in various psychological issues, including anxiety disorders, depression, and conduct disorders (Lynne-Landsman et al., 2011; Moffitt, 1993). Both stubbornness and rebelliousness have been linked to lower levels of life satisfaction and overall happiness, as these individuals are less likely to be receptive to new ideas, experiences, and interpersonal relationships that could contribute to personal growth and fulfillment.

Other Characteristics Presented by Iqbal

While describing the features of *nafs*, he states in *Asrar-i-khudi* that the one who cannot command one's *nafs*, always submits to the command of others. Iqbal expresses a similar idea in another verse in *Payam-i-Mashriq* (1994):

<div dir="rtl">

نفس دارد ولیکن جان ندارد

کسی کو بر مراد دیگران زیست

</div>

The man who lives by others' wishes may have breath in him, but has no soul to save.

For Iqbal, slavery of any kind (physical or intellectual) is unhealthy and unnatural. He often compares the status of a free man and one who is enslaved. Using this analogy in the context of *nafs*, the one who subjugates to the orders of *nafs* becomes its slave, losing his ability to exercise his creative energies within the free will granted by God. Enslavement of the desires of *nafs* can make man weak and timid, leading the soul towards sickness and despair. On the contrary, the free man is like the ruler of his *nafs*, who has trained and disciplined it through hard work, determination, and patience; and now it is ready to take the orders of his master. In *Armaghan-e-Hijaz* (Iqbal, 2005), he states:

<div dir="rtl">

آزاد کی رگ سخت ہے مانندِ رگِ سنگ

محکوم کی رگ نرم ہے مانندِ رگِ تاک

محکوم کا دل مردہ و افسردہ و نومید

آزاد کا دل زندہ و پرسوز و طرب ناک

آزاد کی دولت دلِ روشن، نفس گرم

محکوم کا سرمایۂ فقط دیدہَ نمناک

</div>

محکوم ہے بیگانہ اخلاص و مروت
ہر چند کہ منطق کی دلیلوں میں ہے چالاک
ممکن نہیں محکوم ہو آزاد کا ھمدوش
وہ بندئہ افلاک ہے، یہ خواجہ افلاک

A free man's vein is hard like stone,
A slave is tender like a vine's.
A slave's heart is dead, frustrated and never sees the light of hope.
A free man's heart is alive, full of zest and happiness.
A free man's wealth, a shining heart and warm breath,
that of a slave, only moist eyes.
The slave lacks sincerity and generosity
Though he be adept in argumentation.
And never the twine shall be equal,
The one is a slave to fate, the other, master of fate.

According to Iqbal, the forces that fuel the whims of the *nafs* are love and fear:

خوف دنیا، خوف عقبیٰ ، خوف جان
خوف آلام زمین و آسمان
حب مال و دولت و حب وطن
حب خویش و اقربا و حب زن

Fear of this world, the hereafter, the fear of losing one's life, and the fear of worldly suf-
fering. Love of self, relationships, wealth, and nationalism.

The forces of love and fear not only lead one towards spiritual transgressions but also can have implications on well-being (Khan & Malik, 2021). Common fears and loves, when experienced in excess, can have negative psychological consequences. Excessive fear of this world or the hereafter may lead to religious or existential anxiety, which can be characterized by feelings of dread, guilt, or hopelessness (Pargament, 2002). Similarly, intense fear of losing one's life or experiencing worldly suffering may contribute to the development of anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder and phobias (Craske & Stein, 2016).

Excessive self-love, on the other hand, can manifest as narcissism, which has been associated with interpersonal difficulties, reduced empathy, and increased aggression (Miller, Widiger, & Campbell, 2011). Overemphasis on relationships can lead to codependency, wherein individuals rely excessively on their partners for validation and support, often neglecting their own needs and losing their sense of identity (Knudson & Terrell, 2012). Excessive love for wealth can result in materialism, which has been linked to decreased well-being, lower life satisfaction, and increased psychological distress (Kasser et al., 2014). Lastly, extreme nationalism can foster negative intergroup attitudes and promote hostility towards out-group members (Feshbach, 1997). Thus, experiencing these loves and fears excessively can be detrimental to psychological health and overall well-being.

Iqbal continues in *Asrar-e-Khudi*:

تا عصائی لا الہ داری بدست
ہر طلسم خوف را خوابی شکست
ہر کہ حق باشد چو جاں اندر تنش
خم نگردد پیش باطل گردنش

> *However, as long as the servant of Allah adheres to La ilaha illa Allah, all fears disappear. The one who has truth within himself will never subjugate to falsehood.* (Nicholson, 1920, lines 863–866)

"That he who immerses himself in the realm of *La* (There is no one) will be liberated from the chains of this world, which allows him to stand against the evils of the world with determination." Here, Iqbal is asserting that once an individual internalizes that there's no one but God, all his loves and fears then pertain only to God and no one else.

In the same poem, Iqbal discusses the five pillars of Islam (faith, prayer, fasting, charity, and Hajj). He recognizes that these pillars are meant to help an individual in his journey towards fighting the forces of his ego and becoming God's vicegerent (نیابت الهی). Iqbal says that prayer is a mild form of Hajj for Muslims. Fasting controls the body's desire to eat and drink. Hajj demands a believer to leave behind his family and relatives, wealth, and country, and brings him closer to his nation. Zakat brings all believers to the same state by removing the love of wealth from the heart of a believer. A believer engages in these ongoing acts of worship to strengthen their control over their *nafs*.

Conclusion

Although both pre-modern traditional religions and post-modern Enlightenment thoughts value intellect and rationality, there exists a fundamental difference. In Islamic thought, basic human rationality can be driven by the whims and desires of the lower self (untrained *nafs*) and a person must train the *nafs* to mature the intellectual capacity. This higher-level intellect (*'Aql*) then allows the individual to reach the status of God's representative on this earth. This is an active and ongoing process where an individual can go from having more control over their *nafs* in one instant to losing the battle to the desires in another. This is precisely why Islamic character reformation places *nafs* at the center of this process, while post-modern Western thoughts do not. For Islam, a trained *nafs* is the vehicle towards divine vicegerency, whereas for the post-modern thinker, it becomes the divine to be worshiped. Contemporary psychology must address hedonism as a disease and a precursor to other severe psychological disturbances. As Anna Lembke states in her book *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, "The paradox is that hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, leads to *anhedonia*, which is the inability to enjoy pleasure of any kind" (Lembke, 2021).

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